

Is Sea Basing Currently a Viable Concept?
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We will operate with impunity from the sea without pausing at the beach to build an iron mountain. Ships will be selectively offloaded at sea and an expeditionary brigade-sized force of Marines will then marry up with their equipment and move rapidly from ship to shore and then far inland aboard a combination of current and future land, sea, and air vehicles including Advanced Amphibious Assault Vehicles, high-speed vessels, CH-53 helicopters, and tiltrotor aircraft.

- Lt. Gen. Edward Hanlon, Jr.

Over the past twenty years, the United States military has had difficulty gaining access to land while trying to conduct military operations, such as in Operation DESERT STORM and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF).¹ Events such as these have caused today's military to seek a viable solution in order to ensure successful operational maneuver from the sea (OMFITS) and over-the-horizon (OTH) actions in the future. In the future, friendly nations possibly could deny U.S. military forces land basing or transit due to their own sovereign interests.² The U.S. military sees the solution to this problem as the concept of sea basing.

However, despite influential and significant support from military's top officials, sea basing is not currently a viable concept because it creates a large center of gravity, creates an easy target for maritime terrorism, lacks current support requirements, and faces the scrutiny of current budget issues.

Background of Sea Basing

The Navy's *Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities* sets the foundation and vision, which seeks to organize, integrate, and transform the Navy to meet the challenges in the uncertainty of the twenty-first century.

Sea Power 21 is composed of three fundamental concepts: sea strike, sea shield, and sea basing. "Sea Strike is the ability

to project precise and persistent offensive power from the sea; Sea Shield extends defensive assurance throughout the world; and Sea Basing enhances operational independence and support for the joint force."³

Sea basing can further be described as "the concepts and capabilities that exploit our command of the sea to project, protect, and sustain integrated warfighting capabilities from the maritime domain."⁴ The concept of sea basing envisions the exchanging of material from transport ships at sea, whether Navy amphibious ships or maritime pre-positioning force (MPF) ships, to shore without docking at a port and offloading in the traditional manner. Military operations such as troop staging, the offloading of ammunition, food, and critical repairs⁵ could be accomplished at a distance of 350 miles, as was the case in Task Force 58's deployment into Afghanistan in 2002.⁶

Argument

Although the concept of sea basing is a solution to OMFTS and OTH actions that many top military officials promote, it is currently not at the standard at which the military would like and will not come to full fruition for several reasons.

Center of Gravity

When deployed in support of American forces on the ground, the sea base becomes a friendly center of gravity throughout the

entire conflict. A joint sea based headquarters will be established that will include component commanders, joint forces, and the overwhelming stockpile of logistical assets and firepower.⁷ Sea basing assets will be the hub of all logistical support in order to support military operations. These assets will make sea basing resources a prime target while transiting crucial choke points or sailing the littorals of the world.

Maritime Terrorism

The United States is concerned that three of the worst piracy zones in the world are located in the waters off the Muslim nations of Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Somalia, all of which serve as choke points to routes which the U.S. Navy is accustomed to using. Moreover, well-known terrorist groups, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), and the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) are three of the largest terrorist groups that call this region home.⁸ All have the intention and proven capability to wage acts of maritime terrorism in hopes of gaining international attention to influence the minds of the world.

The targeting of sea basing assets by such terrorist organizations would be simple. All command and control elements, logistics assets, and aircraft would be co-located. All lines of communication and logistics would be flowing in and

out of one central point, enabling the enemy to make a coordinated and focused attack.⁹

For example, terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers, and Hezbollah have conducted multiple maritime terrorist attacks in recent years. Such groups have been able to develop their tactics through devices such as diver and underwater warfare training, small craft raids, and suicide bombings.¹⁰ A well-placed explosive device by a single suicide swimmer could cause an explosion that would have the potential to destroy the majority of all joint logistical assets marked for an engagement. The concern is aptly expressed by Commander Cedric E. Pringle, USN: "How long would it take America to regenerate an entire Sea Based joint task force (JTF) if one were destroyed?"¹¹

Lack of Platforms

One tremendous shortfall of sea basing is the lack of future transportation support systems. Due to the fact that sea basing is still largely a concept, many solutions are available only on paper. These shortfalls include ensuring future ships involved in sea basing can function with current transportation systems (such as helicopters, MV-22s, amphibious assault vehicles, and air cushion landing craft) as well as with future transportation systems (such as the expeditionary fighting vehicle, the vertical take off and landing (VTOL) aircraft, and

the high speed vessel(HSV)). Other shortfalls include the automated cargo handing (ACH) system to permit containers, pallets, and roll-on/roll-off (RO/RO) cargo to be handled at sea and the skin-to-skin (STS) system which will allow replenishment at sea with other cargo ships.¹²

These shortfalls do not even address the lack of future Navy ships. One platform which the Navy estimates will play a role in the sea basing concept is the Landing Ship, Dock X (LSD(X)), which will replace the LSD-41 Whidbey Island and the LSD-49 Harpers Ferry classes. The first LSD(X) is not scheduled to be authorized until 2020, with the first ship being commissioned in 2024. Twelve LSD(X)s will be produced between the years of 2020 and 2031.¹³ Too little is known about such a futuristic ship for the Navy to have considered all requirements that must be met and the challenges the U.S. military will be facing in the year 2024.

A second platform that is intended to be integrated into the sea basing concept that has yet to be introduced is the future cruiser (CG(X)). The Navy intends to produce the first CG(X) in 2011 with 17 more to follow.¹⁴ This platform would replace the current Ticonderoga class AEGIS cruisers.

Most importantly, there is the lack of the MPF Future (MPF(F)) ships, which are to serve as the true cornerstone of

the sea basing concept. These ships have yet to be constructed and have faced many setbacks in their development.

Until all of these platforms are constructed and put into service, they are only concepts and have no bearing on the outcome of current operations.

Budget Issues

The necessary capabilities of sea basing come at a great price to the American tax payer. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that supporting the Navy and the concept of sea basing could cost the Navy an estimated \$22.7 billion dollars (2008 dollars) a year for the next thirty years, as opposed to the Navy's estimate of \$17.3 billion (2008 dollars), about 45% more than what was received last year and 20% more than was requested in 2007.¹⁵ The CBO estimates do not include any additional unforeseen requirements that the Army or Air Force may need.

Counterargument

Proponents of the sea basing concept argue that it is the solution to many problems that face the military today.

Supporters state that the concept will virtually eliminate the military's dependence on forward logistical bases on foreign soil and provide a power projected platform in which to launch offensive operations, sustainment, and reconstitution of the

military force. Supporters also believe sea basing will provide the joint commander a platform of an advanced command and control system.

Center of Gravity

Sea basing supporters agree that sea basing, in conjunction with the MPF(F) ships, will serve as a center of gravity. These platforms will be a valuable asset as the U.S. military will eradicate the requirement of establishing a beachhead support area (BSA) and the requirement of the forces stockpiling equipment ashore upon foreign soil.¹⁶

These ships essentially become floating warehouses for deployed forces and operate afloat and ashore.¹⁷ However, because the logistical system is maintained on several ships and re-supplied from multiple MPF(F) ships or intra-theater connectors, such as the MV-22 or the HSV, the logistical assets will be dispersed throughout the sea base. The dispersion of assets will create a center of gravity that is spread throughout the region, thus creating a more difficult target for a foreign threat.

Maritime Terrorism

Advocates of sea basing do not deny that terrorism is one of the major threats facing the military today. In order to combat maritime terrorism and protect the assets of the sea basing concept, supporters have proposed to forward deploy

specific anti-terrorism forces with sea basing assets. In 2002, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James L. Jones, explained that in the future, all deployable units will deploy with an anti-terrorism capability, such as assets from the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (4th MEB).¹⁸ Advocates feel that such a highly specialized anti-terrorism unit will be sufficient to defend against a myriad of terrorist threats and capabilities.

Lack of Platforms

Advocates of the sea basing concept do not view the lack of current supportable sea basing platforms as a large obstacle. Supporters cite that the current military budget has the lead MPF(F) vessel beginning construction in FY-09 with its commissioning in 2015 and the final MPF(F) ship being commissioned in 2016.¹⁹

As a temporary stopgap, some advocates suggest that the military consider leasing or purchasing modified commercial container ships. These platforms could be reconfigured for military use at a cost of approximately \$300 million per ship.²⁰

In addition, advocates of sea basing state that many of the future concept platforms, such as the LSD(X) and STS, are currently under design and some are even currently being used on a limited scale. An example of this limited use can be seen in

Japan by the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) and their use of the HSV.

Budget Issues

To battle the extremely high cost estimate of sea basing supporters cite the August 2003 study conducted by the Defense Science Board Task Force on sea basing. The Board recommends that the concept of sea basing be, "... a joint effort to produce a capability for joint use - a Department-level responsibility that involves all Services."²¹ The Board further recommends that future developments and analysis of sea basing concepts should be conducted under the leadership of a flag-level joint analysis team, which could eventually become a joint program office.

As a result, supporters of sea basing use this study as evidence for sea basing to be a joint venture between the military Services. Thus creating greater pressure on congress to approve any financial bill associated with the concept of sea basing.

Conclusion

The sea basing concept provides many advantages to the U.S. military. The concept represents a forward base at sea, instant power projection on a grand scale, the reduction of political negotiations, and a self-sustaining logistics base at sea.

However, even with these strengths, the concept still lacks many key components. The military must realize the ramifications of such a concept. Sea basing creates an obvious, and large, center of gravity which could be an ideal target for maritime terrorism. In addition, today's military does not possess many of the assets which will be required to support the sea basing concept. Finally, the military can not afford sea basing requirements at a time when the American public is growing tired of the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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¹ Emerson N. Gardner (LtGen, USMC) and LtGen James N. Mattis, statement before the Seapower Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Future Requirements, 29 March 2006. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2006_h/060329-mattis-gardner.pdf> (13 December 2007).

² Emerson N. Gardner (LtGen, USMC).

³ Vern Clark (ADM, USN). "Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities." *Proceedings*. October 2002, <<http://www.navy.mil/navydata/cno.proceedings.html>> (13 December 2007).

⁴ U. S. Department of the Navy (DON), *Naval Transformation Roadmap 2003: Assured Access & Power Projection...From The Sea*. Washington D. C.: GPO, 2003.

⁵ Vern Clark (ADM, USN). "Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities."

⁶ Emerson N. Gardner (LtGen, USMC).

⁷ Cedric E. Pringle (Commander, USN). "Evaluating the Sea Basing Concept: Is this future capability a critical strength, weakness, or vulnerability for the Theater Commander?", Naval War College, 2003.

⁸ Rommel C. Banlaoi. "Maritime Terrorist in Southeast Asia: The Abu Sayyaf Threat." *TrackPads*. 27 March 2006. <http://www.trackpads.com/magazine/publish/article_1696.shtml> (13 December 2007).

⁹ Cedric E. Pringle (Commander, USN).

¹⁰ Office of Naval Intelligence & U.S. Coast Guard Intelligence Coordination Center. "*Threats and Challenges to Maritime Security 2020*." 1 March 1999. <<http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/maritime2020/TITLE.htm>> (13 December 2007).

¹¹ Cedric E. Pringle (Commander, USN).

¹² Cedric E. Pringle (Commander, USN).

¹³ "LSD(X) Landing Ship, Dock," *Global Security.org* <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/lsd-x.htm>> (15 December 2007).

¹⁴ J. Michael Gilmore and Eric. J. Labs, CBO Testimony: The Navy's 2008 Shipbuilding Plan and Key Ship Programs before the

Subcommittee on Seapower and Expeditionary Forces Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives. Washington D.C.:GPO, 24 July 2007.

¹⁵ J. Michael Gilmore.

¹⁶ U. S. Department of the Navy (DON). *MCWP 3-31.5 Ship-to-Shore Movement*. Washington D. C.: GPO, 1993.

¹⁷ Henry B. Cook. "Sea-basing and the Maritime Pre-Positioning Force." *Military Review*. July-August 2004. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0PBZ/is_4_84/ai_n7068987/pg_1> (13 December 2007)

¹⁸ Statement of General James L. Jones, Commandant of the Marine Corps, United States Marine Corps Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 7 March 2002. < <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2002/Jones3-7.pdf>> (17 February 2008).

¹⁹ "MPF(F) Developments," Global Security.org <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/mpf-f-dev.htm>> (17 February 2008).

²⁰ Tiron, Roxana. "Ships' Cost could Sink Plans for Floating Military Bases." *National Defense*. January 2005. <<http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/issues/2005/jan/shipscostcouldsinkplans.htm>> (17 February 2008).

²¹ Defense Science Board Task Force on Sea Basing. "Defense Science Board Task Force on Sea Basing." August 2003. <<http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/seabasing.pdf>> (17 February 2008).

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